DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 366 329 IR 016 537

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TITLE Television Violence and Behavior: A Research Summary. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Information and Technology, Syracuse, NY.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-IR-93-8
PUB DATE Dec 93
CONTRACT RR93002009
NOTE 4p.
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse on Information & Technology, 4-194 Center for Science and Technology, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY 13244-4100 (free while supplies last).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Aggression; Behavior Patterns; *Behavior Problems; Child Behavior; Children; Federal Regulation; Self Control; Television; Television Research; *Television Viewing; *Violence
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This digest describes the overall pattern of the results of research on television violence and behavior. Several variables in the relationship between television violence and aggression related to characteristics of the viewers and to the portrayal of violence are identified. Viewer characteristics included: age, amount of television watched, identification with television personalities, belief that television violence is realistic, intellectual achievement, and psychological state before and after viewing television. In addition, the digest summarizes concerns regarding the effects of television violence. (Contains 20 references.) (TMK)

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EDO-IR-93-8

IR016537

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Introduction

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) position statement on media violence and children (1990) reports that violence in the media has increased since 1980 and continues to increase, particularly since the Federal Communication Commission's decision to deregulate children's commercial television in 1982. The NAEYC statement cites the following examples:

- Air time for war cartoons increased from 1.5 hours per week in 1982 to 43 hours per week in 1986.
- In 1980, children's programs featured 18.6 violent acts per hour and now have about 26.4 violent acts each hour.

According to an American Psychological Association task force report on television and American society (Huston, et al., 1992), by the time the average child (i.e., one who watches two to four hours of television daily) leaves elementary school, he or she will have witnessed at least 8,000 murders and more than 100,000 other assorted acts of violence on television. Indicating growing concern regarding the issue of television violence, recent commentaries in the Washington Post (Harwood, 1993; Will, 1993; "Televiolence," 1993) highlight:

- a paper by Centerwall (1993) that examines several studies and argues that television violence increases violent and aggressive tendencies in young people and contributes to the growth of violent crime in the United States;
- and a Times Mirror poll, reported in March 1993, that found that the majority of Americans feels that "entertainment television is too violent...that this is harmful to society...that we as a society have become desensitized to violence."

This digest describes the overall pattern of the results of research on television violence and behavior. Several variables in the relationship between television violence and aggression related to characteristics of the viewers and to the portrayal of violence are identified. Finally, concerns regarding the effects of television violence are summarized.

Research Findings

The overall pattern of research findings indicates a positive association between television violence and aggressive behavior. A Washington Post article (Oldenburg, 1992), states that "the preponderance of evidence from more than 3,000 research studies over two decades shows that the violence portrayed on television influences the attitudes and behavior of children who watch it."

Signorielli (1991) finds that:

> Most of the scientific evidence...reveals a relationship between television and aggressive behavior. While few would say that there is absolute proof that watching television caused aggressive behavior, the overall cumulative weight of all the studies gives credence to the position that they are related. Essentially, television violence is one of the things that may lead to aggressive, antisocial, or criminal behavior; it does, however, usually work in conjunction with other factors. As aptly put by Dorr and Kovaric (1980), television violence may influence "some of the people some of the time." (pp. 94-95)

Characteristics of Viewers

The following characteristics of viewers, summarized by Clapp (1988), have been shown to affect the influence of television violence on behavior.

- **Age.** "A relationship between television violence and aggression has been observed in children as young as 3 (Singer & Singer, 1981). Longitudinal data suggest that the relationship is much more consistent and substantial for children in middle childhood than at earlier ages (Eron and Huesmann, 1986). Aggression in early adulthood is also related to the amount of violence watched in middle childhood, although it is not related to the amount watched in early adulthood (Eron, Huesmann, Lefkowitz, & Walder, 1972). It has been proposed that there is a sensitive period between ages 8 and 12 during which children are particularly susceptible to the influence of television violence (Eron & Huesmann, 1986)" (pp. 64-65).
- **Amount of television watched.** "Aggressive behavior is related to the total amount of television watched, not only to the amount of violent television watched. Aggressive behavior can be stimulated also by frenetic, hectic programming that creates a high level of arousal in children (Eron & Huesmann, 1986; Wright & Huston, 1983)" (p. 65).
- **Identification with television personalities.** "Especially for boys, identification with a character substantially increases the likelihood that the character's aggressive behavior will be modeled (Huesmann & Eron, 1986; Huesmann, Lagerspetz, & Eron, 1984)" (p. 65).
- **Belief that television violence is realistic.** "Significant relationships have been found between children's belief that television violence is realistic, their aggressive behavior, and the amount of violence that they watch (Huesmann, 1986; Huesmann & Eron, 1986)" (p. 65).
- **Intellectual achievement.** "Children of lower intellectual achievement generally (1) watch more television, (2) watch more violent television, (3) believe violent television reflects real life, and (4) behave more aggressively (Huesmann, 1986)" (p. 65).

Comstock and Paik (1987, 1991) also identify the following factors that may increase the likelihood of television influence:

- Viewers who are in a state of anger or provocation before seeing a violent portrayal.
- Viewers who are in a state of frustration after viewing a violent portrayal, whether from an extraneous source or as a consequence of viewing the portrayal.

Portrayal of Violence

The following are factors related to how the violence is portrayed which may heighten the likelihood of television influence. Research on these factors is summarized by Comstock and Paik (1987, 1991):

- Reward or lack of punishment for the portrayed perpetrator of violence.
- Portrayal of the violence as justified.
- Cues in the portrayal of violence that resemble those likely to be encountered in real life. For example, a victim in the portrayal with the same name or characteristics as someone towards whom the viewer holds animosity.
- Portrayal of the perpetrator of violence as similar to the viewer.
- Violence portrayed so that its consequences do not stir distaste or arouse inhibitions.
- Violence portrayed as real events rather than events concocted for a fictional film.
- Portrayed violence that is not the subject of critical or disparaging commentary.
- Portrayals of violent acts that please the viewer.
- Portrayals in which violence is not interrupted by violence in a light or humorous vein.
- Portrayed abuse that includes physical violence and aggression instead of or in addition to verbal abuse.
- Portrayals, violent or otherwise, that leave the viewer in a state of unresolved excitement.

Comstock and Paik (1991) argue that "these contingencies represent four dimensions: (a) efficacy (reward or lack of punishment); (b) normativeness (justified, consequenceless, intentionally hurtful, physical violence); (c) pertinence (commonality of cues, similarity to the viewer, absence of humorous violence); and (d) susceptibility (pleasure, anger, frustration, absence of criticism)" (pp. 255-256).

Concerns

Three major areas of concern regarding the effects of television violence are identified and discussed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1990):

- Children may become less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others.
- They may be more likely to behave in aggressive or harmful ways toward others.
- They may become more fearful of the world around them.

Of these, Signorielli (1991) considers the third scenario to be the most insidious:

> Research...has revealed that violence on television plays an important role in communicating the social order and in leading to perceptions of the world as a mean and dangerous place. Symbolic victimization on television and real world fear among women and minorities, even if contrary to the facts, are highly related (Morgan, 1983). Analysis also reveals that in most subgroups those who watch more television tend to express a heightened sense of living in a mean world of danger and mistrust as well as alienation and gloom. (p. 96)

Another concern addressed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1990) is the negative effect on children's play of viewing violent television: "In short, children who are frequent viewers of media violence learn that aggression is a successful and acceptable way to achieve goals and solve problems; they are less likely to benefit from creative, imaginative play as the natural means to express feelings, overcome anger, and gain self-control" (p. 19).

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This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RR93002009. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or ED.